“I’m too tired to cook supper. Let’s order in some Canadian food!” Sadly, no one has ever actually uttered that statement. Most people, both within and beyond Canada’s borders, don’t think of Canada as having a unique and recognizable cuisine. Indeed, in most contexts the phrase “Canadian food” makes about as much sense as “purple noise” or “Swiss navy.” However, there is one place where the phrase “Canadian food” does appear: on signs hanging above restaurants advertising “Canadian and Chinese Food.” I would wager that almost every small town in my nation has a restaurant with such a sign. These tend to be older restaurants, and we might suppose that the signs persist simply because they were sturdily made, and the owners have not had cause to replace them. That, however, doesn’t explain why the phrase “Canadian and Chinese food” continues to appear in newspaper advertisements for those restaurants. Nor does it explain why the phrase “Canadian and Chinese food” appears on the Internet about
“Canadian food” in the first place. "American and Chinese food," which appears only about 600 times, despite the fact that the United States has ten times the population of its northern neighbor. Nor does it explain why the owners of those restaurants felt the need to juxtapose “Chinese food” and “Canadian food” in the first place.

My guess is that it has something to do with how Canada was built: in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the Canadian Pacific Railway was constructed, linking Montreal with Vancouver. In large part, this feat was accomplished on the backs of over ten thousand Chinese immigrants. As the railroad gradually stretched across the country, it was not uncommon for some of these Chinese laborers to forego laying steel track in favor of setting up a restaurant (or laundry) in whatever new community was forming along the rail line. Typically, just one Chinese laborer would settle in each town, hoping to earn enough money from his business to pay the head tax that would allow him to bring his wife and children from China.

In such towns a Chinese immigrant was sorely limited in the kind of restaurant he could establish. On the one hand, he couldn’t open a “regular” café—that is, one that served only Western food—because he might end up competing with a Caucasian, and that wasn’t allowed. On the other hand, he couldn’t open a restaurant that served only Chinese food because that, in a pioneer town, would simply have been too “foreign.” He could, though, open a restaurant that advertised “Canadian and Chinese food,” with the tacit understanding that “Canadian food,” in this context, meant “non-Chinese” food. From a rhetorical perspective, the reference to “Canadian food” on the restaurant’s sign mitigated the foreignness of the establishment, transforming it into a place that was exotic (Chinese food) but not too exotic (Canadian food). This negotiation was typically Canadian: we’ll accept or accommodate almost anything as long as it’s not too extreme. We are a nation of mama bears, preferring our porridge not too hot and not too cold. Our very Constitution rather tepidly promises “peace, order, and good government,” in contrast to the passionate American avowal of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

These differences in national temperament may explain why signs and advertisements for “American and Chinese food” are, in the United States, comparatively scarce. Still, the need to mitigate the “foreignness” of Chinese restaurants has been accommodated in the U.S., albeit in a more covert form. I’m alluding to the tradition of employing a specific typeface on signs and menus for Chinese restaurants: the typeface renders the Roman alphabet with strokes that are intended to imply Chinese characters or, technically, logograms. Nowadays, such typefaces are easily downloadable from the Web, under names such as “chopsticks,” “chowfun,” “Chinatown,” “Canton market,” and so on. Collectively, they are known to typographers as “Oriental simulations” or “faux Asian” typefaces. Like so many typefaces, they appeared in the late nineteenth century, with one of the earliest, known originally as Dormer and later as Pekin, dating back to 1888. Such typefaces were used to advertise pretty much anything that was authentically or even spuriously “Oriental.” They appeared on menus, signs, posters, newspaper ads, and even sheet music, such as 1910’s “In Blinky, Winky, Chinky Chinatown.”

What is curious is that those typefaces have persisted into the twenty-first century, especially on the menus and signs of many Chinese restaurants, but elsewhere as well: for example, on signs for martial arts studios, on the packaging of fireworks, and even in a commercial for Sales Genie that appeared during the 2008 Super Bowl. Were I of Chinese heritage, I would find the continued use of that typeface offensive. However, for some restaurant patrons, the “chopstick” typeface — the signs for “Canadian and Chinese Food” — helps to negotiate the gulf between East and West, implying an establishment that is “exotic lite”: the “Oriental” typeface bedecks the comfortably familiar Roman alphabet. In a different way, the traditional fortune cookie does the same thing. On the one hand, its curious curves and folds, along with its cryptic or Confucius-like adages, evoke what was once called “the inscrutable Oriental”; on the other, the fortune cookie—as most people know—is an American, not Chinese, invention, and the text it contains is written in English.

Happily, I suspect that the “chopstick” font will soon be no more. It has already been put to ironic use on the exterior sign of the “White Trash Fast Food” restaurant in Berlin, and irony is, of course, the circling vulture of culture. Within a generation the “chopstick” font will surely be an embarrassing historical artifact, rather like the head tax that the Canadian government imposed on Chinese immigrants after the last spike of the transcontinental railroad was pounded in, or the 1854 ruling from the California Supreme Court that prohibited Chinese Americans from testifying against their white compatriots.